ADVANCING JEWISH THOUGHT Mosaic

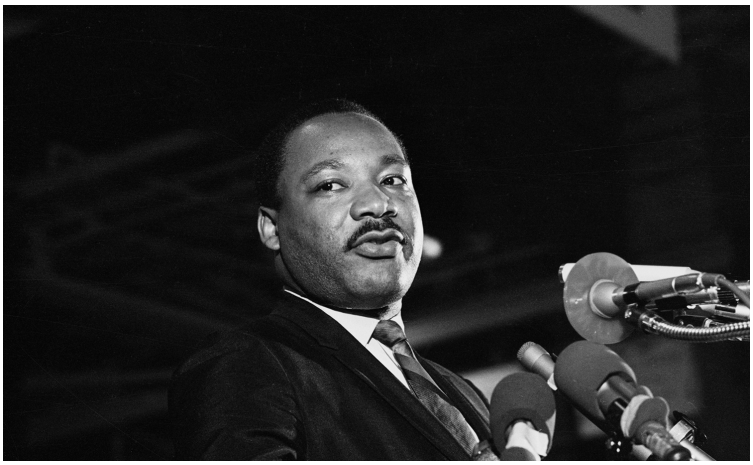
WHERE MLK REALLY STOOD ON ISRAEL AND THE PALESTINIANS

https://mosaicmagazine.com/observation/israel-zionism/2019/03/where-mlk-really-stood-on-israel-and-the-palestinians/

On Martin Luther King Day, the ghost of the great civil-rights leader was summoned to condemn Israel. The problem? While alive, King had plenty of opportunities to do so—and never did.

March 13, 2019 | Martin Kramer

About the author: Martin Kramer is a historian at Tel Aviv University and the Walter P. Stern fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He served as founding president at Shalem College in Jerusalem.



On Martin Luther King Day this past January, as on every anniversary of the great civil-rights leader's birthday, the ghost of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was summoned to take a stand on the subject of Israel and the Palestinians.

This year, the conjurer was Michelle Alexander, a newly-minted *New York Times* columnist, author of *The New Jim Crow,* and visiting professor at Union Theological Seminary. Her January 19 column, entitled "Time to Break the Silence about Palestine," was featured more prominently than usual, appearing on page one of the Sunday Review section, and it produced a new spike of interest in the topic.

"Of course," Alexander stipulated, "there will be those who say that we can't know for sure what King would do or think regarding Israel-Palestine today. That is true. . . . Today, we can only speculate about where King would stand."

Alexander's own speculations about "what King would think or do" followed immediately:

> I find myself in agreement with the [UCLA] historian Robin D.G. Kelley, who

> concluded that, if King had the opportunity to study the current situation in the same way he had studied [the war in] Vietnam, "his unequivocal opposition to violence, colonialism, racism, and militarism would have made him an incisive critic of Israel's current policies."

Alexander's conclusion expanded confidently on Kelley's: "If we are to honor King's message and not merely the man, we must condemn Israel's actions."

This view, today shared by many on the "intersectional" left, runs up against one inescapable fact: during the twenty years between Israel's birth in 1948 and King's death in 1968, two decades in which the Palestinians repeatedly experienced defeat and dislocation, he never mentioned their plight. By contrast, he expressed support of Israel on several occasions, and with notable consistency. The quotations are well-known and needn't be repeated in full. The one most often cited was spoken by King in March 1968, just before his death:

> Peace for Israel means security, and we must stand with all of our might to protect its right to exist, its territorial integrity. I see Israel, and [I] never mind saying it, as one of the great outposts of democracy in the world, and a marvelous example of what can be done, how desert land almost can be transformed into an oasis of brotherhood and democracy. Peace for Israel means security and that security must be a reality.

The problem for the likes of the columnist Michelle Alexander and the historian Robin D.G. Kelley, and for all others who think as they do, is that there are no quotations to counter these.

Why was King silent on the Palestinians? A cynical view, expressed by the historian Ussama Makdisi (a nephew of Edward Said), is that King "reciprocated Jewish American support . . . by turning a blind eye to the plight of the Palestinians." But admirers of King cannot abide such an explanation, which accuses him of moral compromise. They prefer to suggest that King didn't really know much about the conflict, or that he was himself conflicted.

Alexander hints at this in writing that "the evidence regarding King's views on Israel is complicated and contradictory." That his views were complicated is true enough. (In the online version of her article, a link points to a 2016 article of my own on King's carefully crafted response to the Six-Day War of 1967.) But "contradictory"? That suggests an incoherence, a view not fully formed.

Kelley, in the article quoted by Alexander, is more provocative, claiming that King's views of Israel were "more complex and *more naïve* [emphasis added] than is generally acknowledged" and accusing him specifically of "a surprising ignorance of the history [of the conflict] as well as the consequences of the 1967 war."

Contradictory, naïve, ignorant: this is how pro-Palestinian sympathizers deal with the fact that King never said anything to support the position they wish he'd held. To this they sometimes add in extenuation, as does Kelley and as does Alexander in agreeing with him, that had King only given the matter the same careful thought he gave to the American war in Vietnam, he would undoubtedly have said the right things, but tragically he ran out of time.

Does any of this do justice to King? Fresh evidence, brought to light just this year, has rendered the argument more specious than ever. It concerns a March 1959 visit paid by King and his wife Coretta to eastern Jerusalem and the West Bank, then ruled by Jordan. The Kings were on the return leg of a trip to India, from where they had hoped to go to the Soviet Union; but that plan fell through. Instead, they arrived at Jerusalem's airport from Beirut, and departed by air to Cairo four or five days later.

The fact of this visit has always been known to historians and biographers. But it's always been depicted as a strictly religious pilgrimage—because that's how King himself reported it. He gave his only account on March 29, 1959, less than two weeks after his return, in the form of an Easter Sunday sermon in Montgomery, Alabama. The sermon constituted a "footsteps-of-Jesus" telling of the spiritual impact upon him of visiting the Christian pilgrimage sites in the Old City of Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Hebron, Jericho, Nablus, and Mount Gerizim. In referring to them, King linked each one to the life of Jesus. His thoughts and his emotions reached an apogee as he stood in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, "the spot where [Jesus] was crucified":

> I never will forget the experience that came to me. And [as] I stood before that cross and before the point, something within began to well up. There was a captivating quality there, there was something that overwhelmed me, and before I knew it I was on my knees praying at that point. And before I knew it I was weeping. This was a great world-shaking, transfiguring experience.

In his sermon, King made only a passing reference to the contemporary political landscape. In explaining what he meant by "Jerusalem," he noted the division of the city into Israeli and Jordanian sectors, and the impossibility of passage between them. "Because of the Arab-Israeli conflict this city has been divided," he said. "You can only go to Israel without being able to ever go back to an Arab country in the life of your passport; the hate is intensified."

When King's papers were published, they were found also to contain a vague reference to something more political during his stay. "While in Jerusalem we had an opportunity to talk with many people concerning the Arab-Israeli problem," he wrote to a friend. "This, as you know, is still one of the most difficult problems of the world."

But with whom did he speak? No one knew—that is, until Michael R. Fischbach, a historian at Randolph-Macon College, took the trouble to investigate further. The totality of Fischbach's historical research is beyond our scope here. What's relevant for our purposes is a chapter in

his latest book, *Black Power and Palestine* (Stanford, 2019). Titled "Balanced and Guarded: Martin Luther King Jr. on the Arab-Israeli Tightrope," it largely covers the same terrain as my 2016 article on King and the 1967 war.

But on the matter of King's 1959 visit, the chapter breaks new ground. That's because Fischbach had uncovered another source for the visit: Dr. Vicken Kalbian, an Armenian physician, formerly of Jerusalem and later of Winchester, Virginia, where Fischbach interviewed him in 2011. It seems that, on their arrival in Jerusalem back in 1959, King and his wife had asked for a doctor. Kalbian examined them at their hotel, after which King said he'd like to hear the Arab point of view. Kalbian promised to arrange for King to meet Arabs with official standing.

And so he did, at a private dinner with five Palestinians at the National Restaurant. The list of the five men is indeed impressive:

- Ruhi al-Khatib, the Muslim mayor of East Jerusalem, a former official of the British Mandate authority and a tourism entrepreneur whom Israel would remove from office and deport after the Six-Day War. The American consul in Jerusalem in the early 1960s described al-Khatib as "a strong Palestinian nationalist and an ardent exponent of the Arab cause."
- Musa Nasir, a Christian from Birzeit near Ramallah, formerly a Mandate official and later Jordanian foreign minister and UN representative. He carried out the first census of Palestinian refugees after 1948.
- Anton Atallah, a Christian judge, bank proprietor, former deputy mayor of East Jerusalem and another future Jordanian foreign minister and UN representative. Israel would expel him from the West Bank in 1967. According to the U.S. consul, Atallah was "inclined to read the riot act to Americans about their involvement in the Palestine question."
- Anwar Nusseibeh, a Muslim from an old aristocratic family and a graduate in law from Cambridge University who'd lost a leg in the battle for Jerusalem in 1948. He had already served as Jordanian minister of defense, and in the future would serve as ambassador of Jordan to Britain.
- Raja al-Issa, a Christian, publisher of *Filastin*, the most influential Arab daily in Mandatory Palestine, who'd been made a refugee from Jaffa in 1948 and two years later relaunched the paper in Jerusalem.

King thus spent an evening with the most eloquent spokesmen of Arab Palestine: graduates of British universities or the American University of Beirut who had served or would serve Jordan as important ministers, diplomats, and writers. Some of them had already paid a heavy personal price in the conflict with Israel.

Since Kalbian himself didn't attend the dinner, there are no surviving witnesses to the table talk. But it isn't hard to imagine the sorts of things these patrician Arabs would have explained to King over dinner.

Their talk would *not* have been about the "occupation" or about Israeli settlements. This, remember, was a full eight years before the 1967 war, and at the time both eastern Jerusalem and the West Bank belonged to Jordan. Instead, King's hosts would have tried to impress upon him the injustice inflicted by the creation of Israel itself in 1948, culminating in the dispossession of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Arabs. They would have stressed the "plight of the refugees," many of whom had been living in camps for more than a decade.

And King certainly would have caught a glimpse of those camps, at least from a distance: there were almost twenty UN-recognized camps on the West Bank. They were not yet the developed urban quarters they've since become, but the original tents were gone. "The refugees live, family by family, in small huts made of brick or mud," wrote a British observer at the time, "and having an area of about four yards by five yards for each family, whether the family is big or small. Water and sanitation, but no heat, are available and they still suffer very considerable hardship." Most of the inhabitants at that time were true refugees, who had fled their homes in 1948. They were not stateless—Jordan had granted them citizenship—but they still depended on the relief efforts of the United Nations.

In Jerusalem, then, King would have heard the story and seen the still-raw effects of the Nakba, the 1948 "catastrophe," as the Palestinians now call it. Such an experience had been enough to turn some other visiting Americans into strong advocates of the Arab cause. And Fischbach thinks it also had some sort of effect on King as well:

> The trip allowed King to come face-to-face with Palestinians and hear their story, something that led him to understand the Palestinians' plight. . . . The plight of the Palestinians and the Arab-Israeli conflict remained on King's mind as the 1950s turned into the 1960s.

But here a problem—the same problem—arises. There isn't any evidence that the "plight of the Palestinians" weighed on King at all. He wrote nothing and said nothing—this, despite the on-the-ground, first-hand tutorial on Palestine he'd received in March 1959.

As we've seen, Alexander and Kelley speculate that eventually he would indeed have championed the Palestinian cause and condemned Israel. Permit me to speculate on why, when he could easily have done so, he didn't.

For this purpose, let's leave aside the issue of Zionist or pro-Zionist influences on King, which ranged from the teachings of the Bible about the land promised to the Jews to his many associations with Jewish friends and supporters. There were indeed such influences, yet none

of them would have precluded his uttering a word of sympathy for the Palestinians' "plight." Instead, the clue to his silence is better sought in how, before 1967 and afterward, he situated the Arab-Israeli conflict within his own practical and moral priorities.

Let's proceed in an ascending order of probability. First, it's possible that the Arab case, as made to King in Jerusalem, put him off. Although we don't know what was said over dinner that night in 1959, Evan Wilson, the American consul in divided Jerusalem from 1964 to 1967, socialized with the very same Palestinian notables. In his memoir of those years, he explicitly cites his friendship with four of the five (Khatib, Nasir, Atallah, and Nusseibeh) who'd also met King. Wilson adds this:

> In [my] three years I can recall only a very few talks with Arab friends, out of the many that I had on the subject of the Arab-Israel dispute, which reflected a realistic and dispassionate attitude on their part or recognized the need for some sort of accommodation.

The kernel of this "unrealistic" Arab attitude could be summed up in one word: return. During King's stay in Jerusalem, the local press hailed the visit in Amman of a new head of UNRWA, the UN's agency for refugee relief. The new man's first statement, blazoned in an Arabic headline on March 12, was this: "The Only Solution is the Return of the Refugees to Their Lands." Years later, in 1968, King would allude to this demand as indicative of the weakness of the Arab approach to the conflict, an approach he described as "a stubborn effort to reverse history." If that's also what he heard over dinner, it may have left him cold.

Second, King might not have deemed the refugees' "plight" to be especially dire. Remember that he'd arrived in Jerusalem from India, where images of unfathomable misery had seared themselves on his psyche:

> How can one avoid being depressed when he sees with his own eyes millions of people going to bed hungry at night? How can one avoid being depressed when he sees with his own eyes millions of people sleeping on the sidewalks at night? Had no beds to sleep in, no houses to sleep in.... [M]ost of them have never seen a doctor or dentist.

Coretta King would similarly write in her memoirs about the "shock" of India:

> [W]e saw thousands of people dressed in rags sleeping on the sidewalk or huddled in doorways, lying wherever they could find space, [and] legions of emaciated human beings picking through garbage, some wearing only dirty loincloths. . . . Not even in Africa had we seen such poverty.

By comparison, every Palestinian refugee in a UN-run camp on the West Bank had basic shelter, medical care, clothing, and food. Whatever King and his wife may have seen of the

refugee "plight," it did not prompt them to record either "depression" or "shock."

Third, King may not have thought the conflict relevant to his own great cause. When he invoked oppression abroad, it was usually for the purpose of locating the case of American blacks within a global context of racial exploitation. Thus, in a 1957 speech to 7,000 people at an NAACP rally in Atlanta, he pointed out that as recently as 25 years earlier, most of the "colored peoples of the world"

> were exploited by some foreign power. Wherever you looked you could find it. We could turn our eyes to China and see 600 million men and women there. We could turn to India and Pakistan and see 400 million there. We could turn to Africa and see 200 million black men and women there. We could turn to Indonesia and see 100 million there or to Japan and see another 86 million. And all of these people for years lived under the domination of either the French, the Dutch, the Belgian, or the British. They were dominated politically, exploited economically, segregated, and humiliated.

Note that King's map of dominated "colored people" excluded the Arabs of the Middle East and North Africa, who were then as numerous as the Indonesians or the Japanese and historically no less subjected to European imperialism than were the peoples of Asia. They seem also to have been excluded from his framing of the situation in Africa, where he referred specifically only to "black men and women" and offered a figure accurate only for the sub-Saharan portion—this, at the very moment when Arabs were waging a protracted anti-colonial war against French rule in Algeria.

King often broadly denounced imperialism and colonialism. But in choosing which foreign causes to champion, he consistently preferred those, from South Africa to Vietnam, in which peace would involve reconciliation across a clear racial divide. By King's criteria, the Palestine conflict lacked this marker: it was national or religious, but not racial. And King's own experience, both at home and abroad, would have confirmed this view. In his America, people of Arab origin, then still mostly from the Levant, were, like Jews, legally classified as white. (Today, too, the U.S. Census Bureau defines a "white" person as one "having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa.") In 1959 Jerusalem, it's unlikely the faces of the elite Palestinian notables who dined opposite King would have belied that taxonomy.

It would be easy to lengthen and broaden this list of speculations. But there is still another that to my mind is the most compelling of all.

King emerged from a corner of Protestant liberal theology that not only was suffused with pro-Zionist sentiment but took a highly critical view of the Arabs. That approach was personified,

indeed championed, by Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971), arguably the most influential American theologian and ethicist of his time. When King was a student, Niebuhr appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine. In the magazine's accompanying profile, he was called "the spiritual inspiration which has infused old orthodoxy with the tremor of new life."

As King himself would relate, he soon came under Niebuhr's spell:

> During my last year in theological school, I began to read the works of Reinhold Niebuhr. The prophetic and realistic elements in Niebuhr's passionate style and profound thought were appealing to me, and I became so enamored of his social ethics that I almost fell into the trap of accepting uncritically everything he wrote.

The "trap" had to do with Niebuhr's critique of pacifism, with which the pacifist King had problems. But in general he drew inspiration from Niebuhr, and while in graduate school wrote two papers on him. Niebuhr appears in his 1958 book *Stride Toward Freedom*; the inscription in the copy that King sent him praised "your great prophetic vision, your creative contribution to the world of ideas, and your unswerving devotion to the ideas of freedom and justice." In 1963, King cited Niebuhr in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail"; in 1965, at the historic march from Selma to Montgomery, Jesse Jackson spotted a book by Niebuhr in King's open briefcase.

Andrew Young, King's close adviser, would later recall that "whenever there was a conversation about power, Niebuhr came up. Niebuhr kept us from being naïve about the evil structures of society." According to Young, King ultimately even tilted toward Niebuhr's skeptical view of pacifism: "King always claimed to have been much more influenced by Niebuhr than by Gandhi; he considered his [own] nonviolent technique to be a Niebuhrian strategy of power." As King himself wrote: "After reading Niebuhr, I tried to arrive at a realistic pacifism."

Given his influence upon King, it's important to recall the vigor with which Niebuhr supported both the establishment of Israel and its right to defend itself. He had expressed sympathy for Zionism as early as 1929, and in 1942 he founded the Christian Council on Palestine, a pro-Zionist association that grew to include thousands of (mostly Protestant) clergymen. In 1946, he testified in favor of a Jewish state before the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry on Palestine. "The fact that the Arabs have a vast hinterland in the Middle East," he said there, "and the fact that the Jews have nowhere to go, establishes the relative justice of their claims and of their cause."

In 1948 and again during the Sinai campaign of 1956, Niebuhr defended Israel's military actions and chastised American policymakers for not standing firmly behind "our only secure bastion in this troubled area." The Arab refugees, he believed, would have to be resettled elsewhere than in their former homes: "The Jews cannot absorb [them] except in small numbers without imperiling the security of their nation." In 1967, he justified Israel's

preemptive action in what would become known as the Six-Day War: “Obviously a nation that knows that it is in danger of strangulation will use its fists.” Shortly after the war, he backed Israel’s unilateral unification of Jerusalem.

Occasionally, Niebuhr worried that “the Jewish ethic and faith” would “not be morally safe when . . . it comes in conflict with Arab forces.” But in every crisis, he ended up justifying whatever means Israel used in its defense. Niebuhr, in his own words, “never ceased to be favorable to the state of Israel”—as King certainly would have known.

Niebuhr’s views on the Jews and Israel have been dissected by scholars from every angle. But there hasn’t been a single study of his take on Arabs and Muslims. True, for the most part they figure in his work only in connection with their conflict with Israel. But he did hold a distinct view of their nature, encapsulated in the two words he regularly applied to them: “moribund” and “feudal.”

To Niebuhr, the Middle East was a place of greatness lost. “This whole Near Eastern world,” he asserted, “has fallen from the glory where the same lands, which now maintain only a miserable pastoral economy, supported the great empires in which civilization arose.” Whatever grandeur was once introduced to the area by Islam had long since faded. Islam “still believes in a holy war,” he thought, but it “does not believe in itself sufficiently to challenge the whole world.”

Israel thus found itself, in Niebuhr’s words, “surrounded by Islamic nations in various stages of feudal decay.” Their opposition to the Jewish state arose from the fear that this modern implant in their midst would expose their weaknesses, undermine their “moribund feudal or pastoral economies and monarchical political forms,” and threaten the hegemony of “the rich overlords of [the] desperately poor peasants of the Middle East.” Therefore, he concluded, “[t]o support Arab opposition [to Israel] is but supporting feudalism and fascism in the world at the expense of democratic rights and justice.”

As for Arab public opinion, Niebuhr wrote in 1956 to the socialist leader Norman Thomas that “such opinion is limited to a small circle of feudal overlords. . . . [T]he miserable masses are in such abject poverty that an opinion is an impossible luxury for them.” Although, thanks to rising oil revenues, these corrupt and backward “overlords” had the means to effect change, “only a trickle of this oil wealth has been used for raising the miserable standards of these moribund Islamic nations.” Egypt’s Gamal Abdul Nasser, though hailed by many as a putative “revolutionary,” offered no prospect of betterment. In 1957, at the time of the Suez crisis, Niebuhr dismissed him as a pro-Soviet “dictator, imagining himself as a second Saladin” sworn to destroy Israel.

Could King have been unaffected by Niebuhr’s views of the Arabs? He once referred to Niebuhr’s “extraordinary insight into human nature, especially the behavior of nations and social groups.” By the 1950s, Niebuhr’s focus had gravitated from the United States to other

places in the world about which King knew comparatively little. Gaining his own insights over time, King almost certainly would have taken into account Niebuhr's own positions. Indeed, one could hardly avoid them: Niebuhr was at the height of his fame, and his opinion pieces on world affairs, appearing in both Christian and general-interest magazines, were widely read and discussed.

So perhaps it isn't surprising to hear echoes of Niebuhr in King's words on the Middle East. In 1957, King described it as a region in the grip of "the last vestiges of feudalism." Ten years later, he invoked the same term to describe the "Arab feudal rulers" of the oil states who "neglect the plight of their own peoples," leaving the Arab world "in a state of imposed poverty and backwardness." If, in speaking of Africa and India, King would blame their abject poverty on "the domination of the British empire," when turning to the Arabs he pointed an accusatory finger at homegrown "feudalism."

Nor did King ever mention Nasser, hero of the Arabs and purported enemy of "feudalism." When, upon leaving the Holy Land in March 1959, King and his wife Coretta spent a day in Nasser's Cairo before flying on to Athens and New York, they devoted themselves mainly to touring the Pyramids. Unlike other contemporary pilgrims to Egypt like Che Guevara and Malcolm X, King steered well clear of Arab "revolution" and its champion. Perhaps here, too, Niebuhr exerted an influence.

The most striking parallel between Niebuhr and King lay in their shared approach toward mitigating the conflict in the Middle East. That approach might best be described as the pursuit of economic peace, based neither on restitution nor on repatriation but on rehabilitation.

For Niebuhr, the Arabs had to be brought into the modern world; otherwise, they would never accept Israel and there would never be peace. And since their feudal Arab overlords had no interest in any such modernizing project, the task had to be accomplished by the West. In 1956, therefore, he called for a "stupendous undertaking" involving the investment of "billions of dollars" in power generation, soil conservation, and industrialization. The costs of this "bold plan," he insisted,

> would not be greater than another war. It would lift the economic well-being of the whole area and change the moribund agrarian-pastoral economy of the Arab states. It would help to absorb the refugees who are now rotting in their camps. It would mitigate the fears of the Arabs of a highly technical Israeli economy, and it would make the drift toward the [Communist] East less inevitable.

Indeed, Niebuhr thought that such a plan would help discharge a double debt: a debt owed to Israel, now not only a home for a "harassed people" but also an "outpost of democracy," and a

debt owed to the Arabs "for [our] having thrust our unsolved problems upon them." Although he questioned "whether there is enough initiative and imagination in the Western world to take this creative way out of a real impasse," the alternative, he wrote dourly, was "to wait for disaster."

Here again King echoed Niebuhr. After the Six-Day War, the civil-rights leader (who by then had won a Nobel peace prize) was asked what should be done to promote peace in the Middle East. He replied that, for Israel, "peace means security and . . . territorial integrity." But the Arabs required something different: "a kind of economic security that they so desperately need."

> These nations . . . are part of that third world of hunger, of disease, of illiteracy. I think that as long as these conditions exist there will be tensions, there will be the endless quest to find scapegoats. So there is a need for a Marshall Plan for the Middle East, where we lift those who are at the bottom of the economic ladder and bring them into the mainstream of economic security.

King returned to this theme repeatedly. "Until a concerted and democratic program of assistance is effected, tensions cannot be relieved," he insisted. "Neither Israel nor its neighbors can live in peace without an underlying basis of economic and social development." As long as "people are poor, so long as they find themselves on the outskirts of hope," he warned, "they are going to keep the war psychosis alive. And what we need to do now is to go all out to develop the underdeveloped."

As for the refugees, the solution to their "plight" also rested in the international realm: "the United Nations through all of the nations of the world must grapple very constructively and forthrightly with" that "grave refugee problem that the Arabs have on their hands." Nothing in King's response suggested the "return" demanded for so long by the Arabs, or any Israeli responsibility for creation of the "problem" in the first place.

And there was yet another, telling convergence between Niebuhr and King: both thought the economic "carrot" would work only if it was made absolutely clear to the Arabs that, while aiding them, the West was also committed to guaranteeing Israel's existence. Only then would the Arabs abandon war.

Indeed, in 1957, looking back on the decade since 1948, Niebuhr thought it "idle to expect to pacify the region by even the most ambitious plan for the development of the economic resources of the whole region. All such proposals do not gauge the depth and the breadth of the Arab spirit of vengeance correctly." An economic program like the one he himself proposed would stand a chance only if there were "an unequivocal voice from us that we will not allow the state [of Israel] to be annihilated."

King would make the same point in famously emphasizing that "the whole world must see that Israel must exist and has the right to exist and is one of the great outposts of democracy in the world." "We must see Israel's right to exist," he declared in a national television interview shortly after the Six-Day War in 1967, "and always go out of the way to protect that right to exist." And he added:

> We must also see that Israel is there and any talk of driving the Jews into the Mediterranean, as we have heard over the last few weeks or the last several years, is not only unrealistic talk but it is suicidal talk for the whole world and I think also it is terribly immoral.

Were these echoes of Niebuhr mere coincidences? To be sure, in the 1950s and 1960s, invoking Arab "feudalism" wasn't rare in socialist and Zionist rhetoric. And even in Christian circles Niebuhr wasn't alone in stressing the importance of economic development as the foundation of peace. In the midst of the Six-Day War, Andrew Young told King that he should follow the theme, articulated in Pope John XXIII's 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris,* "that peace is development. And part of the problem in the Arab-Israel conflict is the absence of development in the Arab world and tie it to the need to combat poverty."

But while these ideas were in the air, it was Niebuhr who popularized them in the liberal Protestant circles that most mattered to King. This is something often missed by those who believe King supported Israel in exchange for the support he received from liberal Zionist Jews. No doubt, figures like Joachim Prinz and Martin Peretz played a reinforcing role. But while they were King's allies, they weren't his peers; it was primarily to the leading lights of Protestant thought that he would have looked for guidance. True, most of them favored the Arabs over Israel. But, in King's eyes, Niebuhr stood head and shoulders above them all.

In light of what we've seen, does it make any sense to describe King's understanding of the Israel-Palestinian conflict as contradictory, naïve, or ignorant?

In fact, King knew the issues intimately, from first-hand exposure in 1959, from contemporary debates among the Protestant theologians who so affected his political and religious thought, and especially from the writings of Niebuhr, whose broad influence on him is amply attested, most notably by King himself. Of course he also reached his own conclusions, informed by his experience and intellect. But it's almost unthinkable that he would have staked out a lone position among liberal Protestants. Niebuhr was a necessity.

That King never produced a quotation that could be interpreted in any way as criticizing Israel for the "plight" of the Palestinians puts a heavy burden on those who, like Michelle Alexander, maintain that "if we are to honor King's message . . . we must condemn Israel's actions." Not that it's illegitimate to scour the ideas of long-dead founders for guidance to the living

present. But as founders go, King hasn't been dead for that long, and there was plenty about Israel that he could have condemned if he had wanted to.

This is no small point. "There is no doubt King supported Zionism," Cornel West has written, "yet he did not live long enough [after 1967] to witness a vicious Israeli occupation that terrorizes, traumatizes, and stigmatizes precious Palestinians." The fact, however, is that King lived through a period now regarded by many Palestinians as *worse* than what followed, yet he never once condemned any of Israel's actions.

Begin with 1948, when 750,000 Palestinian Arabs fled their homes. Alexander writes that "we must not tolerate Israel's refusal even to discuss the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes." Yet Israel also refused to discuss that "right" in the 1950s and 1960s, and, as we have seen, King not only tolerated it, he warned against what he called the Arabs' "stubborn effort to reverse history."

Similarly, Alexander urges that Israel be condemned for its "unrelenting violations of international law," including "multiple hostilities and thousands of civilian casualties in Gaza." Such charges against Israel were also leveled in King's day: Israel stood accused of massacring civilians in Qibya (West Bank) in 1953 (the State Department called the Israeli raid there "shocking"), and in Kafr Qasim (Israel) and Khan Yunis (Gaza) in 1956. The United Nations Security Council unanimously condemned the large-scale Israeli retaliatory strike on Samu (West Bank) in 1966, described by the United States as "deplorable" and "inexcusable." Yet King never lent his voice to such condemnations of Israel.

Alexander especially urges her readers to "speak out against the system of legal discrimination that exists inside Israel" against the country's Arab minority. There is no such "system" today. But in the 1950s, and right up to 1966, there certainly was one: Arab citizens of Israel were subjected to military rule. Yet King not only didn't speak out against this circumstance, he insisted that Israel was an "oasis of brotherhood and democracy."

Finally, we come to 1967 and its aftermath. Alexander says it would honor King's message to condemn today's "continued occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza." King did say publicly that he thought Israel should "probably" return territory it captured in 1967, because "to hold on to it will only exacerbate the tensions and deepen the bitterness of the Arabs." But this pragmatic rationale for returning territory emphatically did *not* classify Israel's "occupation" as illegal, immoral, or in violation of the territorial integrity of Arab states, and it contrasted vividly with his much stronger statement that "all people of good will must respect the territorial integrity of Israel."

Nor did King ever specify which territory Israel should return to Jordan, Egypt, or Syria. After the unification of Jerusalem at the end of June 1967, he privately said of the annexed eastern portion of the city that "any way you say it, they [the Israelis] don't plan to give it up." That annexation drew many condemnations from Christian bodies (as well as expressions of

support, notably by Niebuhr). King never took a public stand.

It's doubtful that King's silence on all of these episodes arose from fear of addressing them. It instead reflected his view of the conflict of which they formed a part. Alexander elevates "the crisis in Israel-Palestine" to the level of "one of the great moral challenges of our time." If King had thought so in his time, he would have said so. Evidently he believed otherwise, framing it simply as a "difficult problem" for which there should be a pragmatic solution.

When King faced "great moral challenges," he didn't hesitate to condemn wrongdoing, and wrongdoers, in language both stirring and courageous. When he faced mere "problems," he proposed mundane solutions—in this case, a "Marshall Plan" to "develop the underdeveloped." For him, the moral issues that most mattered were civil rights and Vietnam. If he saw tragedy in the Six-Day War, he found it in the possibility that the war had "given [President Lyndon] Johnson the little respite he wanted from Vietnam." "I don't want attention to get off Vietnam," King complained to his advisers, adding that "this situation has confused it a great deal." Before 1967, King saw the Middle East conflict as a low priority, and after it, as an unwelcome diversion.

Is there a Martin Luther King "legacy" here? Perhaps, but one that can be entertained only with the proviso that it is inherently nonsensical to maintain that he would take one or another specific position today. To get to today, he would have had to live through another half-century of history, and who knows how it would have affected him? Yes, every explanation of history involves some degree of "what-if" speculation, but there's something especially presumptuous in claiming to know how a political genius, or a moral prophet, might have evolved.

Still, it is interesting to note that King's idea of "economic security" as a precondition of peace is still very much alive today. Indeed, rumors have floated that it forms the core of the much-anticipated "peace plan" devised by Jared Kushner on behalf of his father-in-law. If so, it would not be outrageous for the president to claim inspiration from King, and there'd be plenty of King quotations to support the claim—with Niebuhr in reserve.

By contrast, the Alexanders of the world and other BDS supporters—"from," as they put it, "Ferguson to Palestine"—haven't a single King arrow in their quivers. No amount of radical Ouija-boarding can ever make up for that lack.